

SERMON: DIOCESE OF BUNBUTY 25/2/2024: GEOFF CHADWICK

LENT2B Mk 8:31-35: GOD AND IMPASSIBILITY

One of the attributes that the Greek philosophers assigned to God was impassibility. This is the idea that God is unfeeling-or has no emotions. This idea emerged from some of Plato's ideas suggesting that change compromised God's perfection-thus- God must be unchangeable, and by default unfeeling. The link is to do with emotion. Emotion was seen to be ungodlike because to be emotional was to be affected or changed by an external cause. These impassable and immutable (unchanging) attributes assigned to God led to some interesting wrangling when the doctrine of the Trinity was being formulated. There's no reason to elaborate on this here, other than to say that immutability and impassibility are very far from the Old and New Testament depictions of God.

So, having said this, in the ancient Greek world, in Jesus' time, a suffering God was nonsense to those who embraced Plato's Greek ideas. Remembering that Mk's Gospel is written for a Greek audience, Peter's rebuke of Jesus after hearing him say that the "Son of Man must suffer many things" (Mk8. 31, NRSV), is their protest too. To them, it was nonsense to suggest that God (or even his Son) would suffer. It's just not God-like! Jesus, however states otherwise – a point not missed on those who first heard Mk's Gospel.

In a sense, Mk has used Peter's rebuke as a way to proclaim a mini-gospel of Christ. In case you missed it, here it is again:

The son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again (Mk 8.31, NRSV)

Suffering and rejection are part of the gospel as much as rising again.

This is good news to the early church members. New converts were often not welcomed in their communities and suffered in many ways. Remembering the suffering of Jesus was a source of great comfort. Maybe it is for us too: “If Jesus suffered and rose, then our suffering is bearable.”

Curiously, in the Buddhist Tradition, Prince Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, had been forbidden to leave his Father’s castle lest he meet suffering. Escape, he did, and was confronted by, a sick person, a dead body and an old person. This led him on a quest to find the meaning of these things and to found the Buddhist religion.

Similarly, in our Christian Tradition we have St Francis, who as the son of a wealthy merchant was shielded from life’s sufferings. Then after an encounter with a poor leper on the road, he felt called to give up his riches and found the Franciscan Friars who vow to be poor to assist the poor. For him, God was to be found in the faces of the suffering.

In more recent times we may think of Mother Theresa’s “Sisters of the poor” who do something similar.

In Jesus’ time and adding to Peter’s woe, was the existence of what we now call the prosperity doctrine. This is the idea that those faithful to God are blessed with riches and fortune. Or putting it another way: “The good are blessed, and the bad are cursed”. This is not what Christianity teaches, even though some denominations proclaim it. The reality is that all people, good and bad, experience good times and bad times.

Peter has got it wrong – as he so often does-as a new disciple he is looking for God’s good fortune. Suffering is not part of the plan! “Forbid it Lord...”

Suffering is an interesting thing. Although we shirk from it, it actually has a purpose. Pain is our body's way of saying something is wrong. Pain signals the need for correction. Without pain, we would never know danger, or ill health, or injustice or confusion. Pain is a signal that something needs fixing.

The author John Azumah, in a closely argued article entitled *Following Jesus as Unique Lord and Saviour in a Broken Pluralistic World*, also makes this point quite strongly:

What makes the Christian God (revealed in Christ) unique is not the fact that he is Almighty, Supreme, King of kings and Lord of lords. All other religions with a concept of a Supreme Being believe all these about their god. The uniqueness of the Christian God lies in the fact that he is prepared and willing to descend from his throne, lay aside his crown, dirty his hands, walk in the slums and wash the feet of his disciples! ... By his example, Jesus is teaching us that it takes a cross to fix a broken world, not a crown. (Azumah, 2007) p305

... it takes a cross to fix a broken world, not a crown.

For those of you who are film buffs and have seen *The Matrix* movie, the directors portrayed it like this. Towards the end of the film where good has been running away or hiding from evil for most of the movie, the main Character (Neo) who is a Messiah figure, turns and faces the forces of evil head on. He enters directly into the source of evil and defeats it from within.

This is what we believe as Christians. Jesus did not run or hide from evil, he faced it head on and defeated it from within.

This, I believe is what Jesus meant when he said:

The son of man must suffer many things... He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mk 8: 31-35, NRSV)

That's not to say that evil has left us. But it is to say that in God's economy, evil does not have the final say. In God's economy, risen life has the last say!

This is the journey of Lent. We are heading into darkness only to be surprised by God's indestructible dazzling goodness. Evil, though present, does not have the last say!

Perhaps God is in raptures of joy about that!

... it takes a cross to fix a broken world, not a crown.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Reference:

Azmuah, J. (2007). *Following Jesus as Unique Lord and Saviour in a Broken Pluralistic World* (Evangelical Review of Theology ed., Vol. 31:4). Paternoster Periodicals.